Road Map

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH GUIDE

Rethinking School Lunch – a project of the **Center for Ecoliteracy**
2528 San Pablo Avenue, Berkeley, California 94702 www.ecoliteracy.org

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"When the lunch period is recognized as part of the learning day, new opportunities and responsibilities emerge for students, food services, and the district as a whole. The lunch period is a window for critical learning and modeling of attitudes toward food. This learning can be linked to the classroom curriculum, experiences in the school garden and kitchen classroom, and visits to local farms. In an integrated farm-to-school approach, the lunch period and the lunch itself become teaching and learning opportunities in the daily life of the entire learning community."

— Janet Brown, program officer for food systems, Center for Ecoliteracy

WHAT'S INSIDE?

SCHOOL LUNCH FEEDS MINDS, BODIES, AND COMMUNITIES: School lunch is a vital issue in our society that goes far beyond the meal on the plate. It can be the doorway to a whole new way of providing education for sustainability with broad-reaching effects for our children and community.

VISION: A program that uses a systems approach to combine farm-to-school concepts with an integrated curriculum.

IMPLEMENTATION: The challenges are great. It takes a team, a systems approach, and a business planning process to bring together diverse partnerships to find solutions in common.

IT'S TIME TO IMPLEMENT A FARM-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAM: **Marilyn Briggs**, former director of the Nutrition Services Division and retired Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction for the California Department of Education, outlines the urgent need for a farm-to-school lunch program, and shares her experiences and thoughts on how it can be accomplished.

SCHOOL LUNCH FEEDS MINDS, BODIES, AND COMMUNITIES

The Center for Ecoliteracy has found that a school lunch program based on serving fresh, locally grown food is the heart of an innovative approach to learning and teaches children how to make intelligent choices that will benefit their health and create sustainable communities. Local experiences indicate that with an integrated educational approach, school lunch can be the doorway to a whole new way of providing education for sustainability with broad-reaching effects for our children and community.

Here's what can happen in such a program:

- **Using the local food system as a context for learning**, students gain a deeper understanding of the relationships among their food choices and the environment.
- **Working with food service staff**, students have hands-on experiences planning healthy meals that connect to the classroom nutrition lessons.
- **As consultants to a school menu marketing campaign**, students hone their language arts skills and apply what they have learned about effective communication.
- **Students become familiar with their local landscape** by visiting farms and learning about the local farm economy, making real-life connections to their history and social studies lessons.
- **Field-to-table lessons** offer exposure to local economic issues and help students experience the benefits of sustainable living.
- **Students apply their math skills** as they measure ingredients while helping prepare meals.
- **By composting kitchen waste** from food preparation, students connect their real-life experiences with science lessons on decomposition.
- **Students see cause and effect** in lessons about food packaging. By buying fresh, local foods, package waste is reduced and natural resources are conserved.

Today, the nation's school lunch program is at a crossroads, faced with nutritional and service problems so serious they make news headlines. So many issues are involved — nutrition, facilities, food service, student disinterest — that it's hard to know where to begin. Rethinking School Lunch reframes this challenge as an opportunity to embrace a whole-systems approach to education. It is a roadmap that can guide interested stakeholders to an integrated program that provides a wide range of benefits that extend beyond the meal on the plate.

VISION

Rethinking School Lunch envisions school lunch not as an isolated meal-a-day program, but as the vital center of an intricate connection of relationships among students, teachers, parents, and community. One essential element in this web of interconnections is the **farm-to-school** model, which provides the school lunch program with fresh food from local, sustainable family farms. Farm-to-school practices connect students to their food source through meals and field trips, improve the nutritional content and quality of food in schools, and help local farmers remain economically viable.

Another distinguishing characteristic of Rethinking School Lunch is its inclusion of an **integrated curriculum approach.** Centering the curriculum on food systems increases ecological literacy by focusing on how food reaches the table, as well as the impacts the food system has on the natural world. This increase in "food literacy" will naturally inform the food choices of children and their families into the future.

Here's what this vision of an effective school lunch program looks like:

- **Meals are prepared using fresh, seasonal, sustainably grown produce** and products from local and regional sources.
- **The dining facility also serves as a learning center**: It offers fresh food prepared on site, supports and reflects the lessons learned in the classroom, and welcomes students with an inviting atmosphere.
- **District-wide educational goals** include integrating the school food service with the academic curriculum.
- **Hands-on activities in school gardens**, kitchen classrooms, and on local farms or at farmers' markets help reconnect students to their own habitats and communities.
- **A school waste management program** helps students make connections between daily life and the need to conserve natural resources.
- **Professional development** supports the integration of classroom curriculum and the school lunch experience.
- **Marketing efforts promote healthy meal program**s and meaningful learning environments to parents and students.
- **Communications efforts** — educational pamphlets, guides for rallying action committees, and other informational materials — build relationships between schools and their constituencies.
- **Community-wide development of a district food policy** guides the school nutrition program.
- **Viable budget planning** uses real data to balance the value of serving fresh food with the costs of serving packaged, processed foods.

IMPLEMENTATION

Sustainable communities are achieved through meaningful collaboration. Informed, committed people engaged in active teamwork with common goals provide the energy that fuels this vision. Rethinking School Lunch is designed to motivate a collaborative partnership of school administrators, food service personnel, educators, change agents, and parent groups to implement a business planning process that enhances the well-being of students and helps improve student performance.

Every school district has a unique set of institutional challenges and opportunities, so Rethinking School Lunch does not dictate a single implementation solution. Instead, the Rethinking School Lunch (RSL) guide provides a comprehensive overview of the 10 key components identified as vital to the success of any school lunch program.

HOW TO BEGIN

Where is the best place to start? Marilyn Briggs, former director of the Nutrition Services Division and retired Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction for the California Department of Education, says, "You can break into the implementation circle at many points. The most important thing is to start somewhere, and stick with it."

Every interested reader — school administrators, food service directors, teachers, and parents — will approach this project from a unique perspective. Perhaps the most effective way to enter Rethinking School Lunch is by reading the topic closest to one's area of interest, and then exploring related topics. To understand the ideas that ground Rethinking School Lunch, be sure to read "Food Policy" and "Food and Health."

Consider the following approach for learning about and connecting with potential collaborative partners:

1. **Each person should read the chapters** that are closest to his or her own discipline or area of responsibility.
   - **A district administrator might become familiar with theory and practice** by reading "Food Policy" and then moving on to "Finances," "Facilities," and "Procurement."
   - **A food service director might begin by reading "Food and Health"** and "The Dining Experience" to discover how food service staff can contribute to the cafeteria as an important social experience and classroom, and "Procurement" to learn about new buying practices.

- **An educator might begin by reading "Curriculum Integration,"** and then turn to "Waste Management" and "Marketing and Communications" to better understand the motivation for integrating classroom learning into the lunch experience and how students can become proactive by promoting the program to the community.
- **A parent might begin with "Food and Health"** to learn how nutrition affects their children's overall health and ability to learn, and move on to "Food Policy" to see how school lunch can become a fundamental part of the academic curriculum.

2. **Read the chapters that will illuminate the viewpoints** of other partners in the process. Learning as much as possible about all of the interconnected elements in Rethinking School Lunch will provide a 360-degree vision of the process and will help all partners see the common ground among the issues that affect school lunch. It may spark ideas that lead to a positive, creative discussion and better business planning.
3. **Contact other interested parties** and get started. Help the school community begin to make positive connections between children, the food they eat, and the land the food is grown on, in the interest of healthy children and healthy communities.

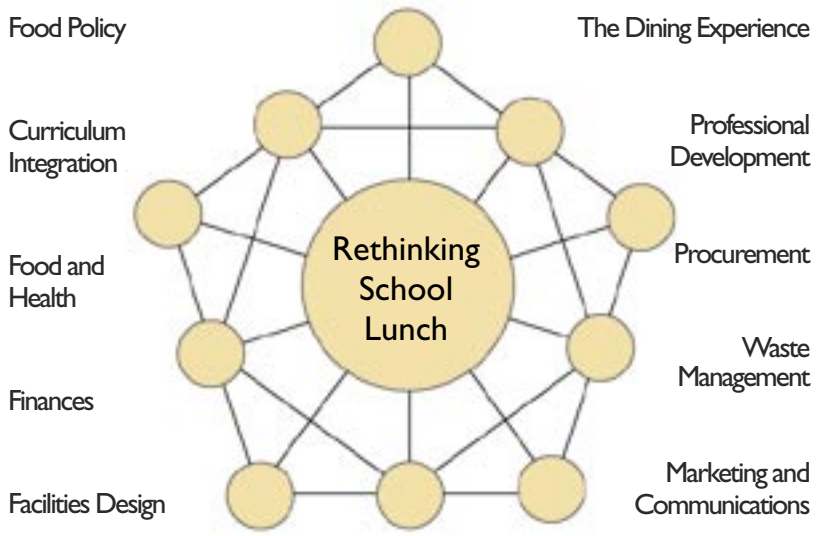
RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH
Web of Connections

This document is part of a comprehensive **Center for Ecoliteracy** project that provides helpful information on topics related to redesigning school lunch programs.

The diagram illustrates our systems approach to integrating school lunch programs with curriculum, improving student health and behavior, and creating sustainable communities.

School administrators, food service directors, teachers, and parents will each approach this project from their unique perspective. Readers can begin with the topic that interests them most, then explore the other related topics.

The entire Rethinking School Lunch project is available at: **www.ecoliteracy.org/rethinking/rsl.html**



IT'S TIME TO IMPLEMENT A FARM-TO-SCHOOL PROGRAM

Rethinking School Lunch is not just a goal to be attained at some time in the future: Many of its concepts are being put into practice right now. Throughout the RSL guide, exemplary leaders who share the Center for Ecoliteracy's vision for Rethinking School Lunch discuss their experiences. Marilyn Briggs, an award-winning and nationally recognized professional and leader in food service and nutrition research is one of those dedicated innovators who can see the relationship of the parts to the whole issue. Her work promotes the link between agriculture, nutrition and health through policy and programs.

Connecting Health with Educational Goals

by Marilyn Briggs

Food services is often the last district partner to be brought into the change process, but it is the one upon which all others rely for success. School districts, especially those that undergo a food policy development process, should plan on implementing a program of professional development for food service staff. Professional development is a direct and critical investment in the individuals the district is counting to make the change.

New menus based on cooking from scratch may require food service employees to learn new skills, especially if the current service is thaw-and-serve. The menus the district intends to serve will tell you what skills the food service staff needs to acquire. It is also true that food service employees' jobs become more rewarding and satisfying when the work is less routine and requires skillful execution. It is through professional development that food service staff acquires those valuable and transferable skills which might qualify them for higher pay. When food service staff find the work more satisfying, and receive the respect they deserve, enthusiasm will build for the new program.

Though many food service directors still provide professional development, it's not a requirement. The California Department of Education offers training through community colleges. An entire infrastructure is set up, but it's difficult to fill the classes if no specific requirement exists.

At a policy level, I would advocate for better pay for food service staff, and development of some professional requirements and expectations for anyone who is involved in the preparation of food for children. These would include cooking skills, basic sanitation and safety training. We're not there yet. For instance, a state requirement

for basic sanitation and safety training only emerged in California in the last five years, and it requires only one person in the district to be certified in sanitation and safety.

This emphasis on the farm-to-school approach to improving food in schools comes at a time when we are facing a national health crisis, and much of that crisis is nutrition-related. Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions. Some 4.7 million (11 percent) of children between six and 17 are overweight; this proportion has doubled in the last 30 years. Type II diabetes was once called "adult onset" diabetes. Today, it's one of the most serious health problems of overweight children, and its rates have recently escalated.

Reports to the U. S. Department of Agriculture show that only two percent of school-age children meet the USDA's serving recommendations for all five major food groups. Just over half eat less than one serving of fruit a day. Nearly 30 percent eat less than one serving a day of vegetables that are not fried. Added sugar contributes to 20 percent of total food energy in children's diets; 56 percent to 85 percent of children consume soda on any given day.

According to the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, poor diet and physical inactivity are responsible for as many premature deaths as is tobacco—more than 1,200 deaths a day. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) identify diet as a "known risk" for the development of the nation's three leading causes of death: coronary heart disease, cancer, and stroke, as well as for diabetes, high blood pressure, and osteoporosis, among others.

If one of our primary goals as educators is to help students prepare for healthy and productive lives, then nutrition and health education are central to that goal. The most systematic and efficient means for improving the health of America's youth is to establish healthy dietary and physical activity behaviors in childhood. The CDC reports that "young persons having unhealthy eating habits tend to maintain these as they age. Behaviors and physiological risk factors are difficult to change once they are established during youth."

Yet fewer than one-third of schools provide thorough coverage of nutrition education related to influencing students' motivation, attitudes, and eating behaviors.

Most of us already connect nutrition with health. If we go one step further to connect health with educational goals, then we have effectively connected nutrition to academic performance. There is so much concern over test scores these days. But if kids aren't in a position to learn because they're hungry, or they don't get enough nutritious food at home, then schools that don't make the nutrition/performance connection in the cafeteria end up undermining what they're trying to do in the classroom. They know this, too. As an example, on the night before schools administer standardized tests, they'll tell kids to eat breakfast in the morning, or they'll serve a breakfast on campus on test days.

Studies repeatedly link good nutrition to learning readiness, academic achievement, and decreased discipline and emotional problems. A hungry child is not equipped to learn. Any teacher knows that if children are hungry, they're not thinking about their lessons. Educational theorists sometimes forget that.

In 2003, I served as one of the writers for a joint position statement of the American Dietetic Association, the Society for Nutrition Education, and the American School Food Service Association. Part of our statement read: " . . . comprehensive nutrition services must be provided to all of the nation's preschool through grade twelve students. These . . . shall be integrated with a coordinated, comprehensive school health program and implemented through a school nutrition policy. The policy shall link comprehensive, sequential nutrition education; access to and promotion of child nutrition programs providing nutritious meals and snacks in the

school environment; and family, community, and health services' partnership supporting positive health outcomes for all children."

To me, that means that you need to connect health, through nutrition education, to the whole curriculum—not merely as one of the components in the curriculum—but as something that's embedded in all aspects of it. It means making school meals part of the nutrition education program. That connection feels self-evident, but schools and districts have been slow to make it. The lunch period has more often been regarded as time stolen away from the curriculum, rather than as part of the curriculum.

Implementing a program that addresses nutrition, health, and school lunches, through an integrated curriculum requires many steps. It's a circle that can be entered through many points, including the many sections of this "Rethinking School Lunch" guide, but it all starts with the food on children's plates.

Menus are the heart of the whole system. Kitchens should be designed to prepare the menus you want to serve, and not the other way around. Menus also provide the basis for reviewing food service staffing and staff development programs, facilities, budget, and the procurement system, to see what needs to change.

School meal programs can provide students with better nutrition for one or two meals every day, which would be a great health improvement for many students. Even the average lunch brought from home provides less than one-third the Recommended Dietary Allowance for food energy, vitamin A, vitamin B-6, calcium, iron, and zinc.

But it's not enough that school food be nutritious. Healthy meals won't make a difference to student health if students reject them or throw them away. The food needs to be delicious, attractive, and appealing to young people. Fortunately for nutrition educators, good fresh food usually does taste better. When children taste freshly picked or prepared foods—sometimes for the first time—they often discover that they like them.

I much prefer this approach to the negative approach of "Do not eat this, and do not have that." It's a more positive, much more educational way for students to learn how delightful and wonderful it can be to add fruits, vegetables and whole grains to their diet. Rather than calling attention to a banned food, which then becomes more attractive, enjoyment of fresh food's natural tastiness will help to establish new attitudes toward food and lifelong healthy eating habits.

Offering nutritious food by itself, even if it tastes good, may still not be enough. The pervasive availability of high-fat foods, non-nutritious foods served in the influential environment of restaurants geared to young children, and children's predisposition to these foods, all contribute to unhealthy diets. The media has the capacity to persuade children to make poor food choices. Studies have shown that even brief exposure to televised food commercials can influence preschool children's food preferences. A successful program may also need to use the tools of marketers to reach both children and parents. And when school gardens or cooking classes are also integrated into the curriculum, so that children grow or prepare the foods they eat, the food almost always becomes more attractive.

Buying food locally, to be prepared and served fresh, helps local farmers who are often struggling to compete with agribusiness. It gives local farmers a chance to diversify their markets, and that in turn helps the local economy. Healthy farms provide jobs, pay taxes, and keep working agricultural land from going to development. The benefits of preserving farmland include lower costs of community services, more open space, valuable flood control, diversified wildlife habitat, and greater community food security.

Schools represent a reliable and steady demand for produce and products that farmers can plan for, allowing farms to establish better controls on planting, harvesting, and marketing. Buying locally also reduces the transportation costs, packaging, fossil fuel use, and

exhaust emissions caused by shipping food over long distances. In many cases, food bought locally costs schools less. Having local food sources also enables schools to bring farmers to the classroom, and allows students to go on field trips to farms and at farmers' markets.

The lifelong nutrition habits and lessons that children acquire from school food programs don't end with eating better food. A food systems curriculum promotes understanding about where food comes from and the natural cycles that produce it. The way that meals are served and eaten is part of the hidden curriculum that tells students what the school really believes about food. Does the school encourage fast-food attitudes by providing short lunch periods in which eating competes with getting out of the cafeteria and onto the playground? Or does the school model a belief that mealtime is part of living a healthy life?

I advocate serving meals family style, around a table, as an alternative to "grab and go" through a cafeteria line. When the social experience of sitting together with other students and calmly eating the food is a positive experience, children want to make time to have that experience with their friends and families. In order for this to happen, the cafeteria needs to be a positive environment in all respects.

Some people argue that cafeteria lines are faster and more efficient, but family style service can actually be faster because it's all set up in advance. The kids come in, and the food is there on the table. They actually have the full lunch period to eat without having to stand in line.

In order to serve family style successfully, you do need an adult in the role of "table host" at each table. It quickly becomes too costly if you rely on paid staff, but I've been involved in very successful programs in which senior citizens served as the table hosts. Those programs worked very well. The kids ate in a better atmosphere; the senior citizens were able to make a valuable contribution and enjoy a nutritious lunch. The table hosts received stimulation from interacting with the kids; the kids were exposed to new role models. A program like that also helps connect schools to their communities, which can create more advocates for the schools when bond issues and other funding measures come before the community.

Unfortunately, the hidden curricula of most school systems—from industrial cafeteria lines, to the amount of time allotted for lunch, to combining lunch with recess—teach kids that meals are something to rush through on the way to somewhere else. Recent research shows that children eat better when they also have a quiet time that follows eating. The ideal seems to be to have physical activity in the morning, have a quiet study time of some type before lunch, have lunch, and then have a reading or quiet time after that. Physical activity needs to be delayed until later in the day. It's pretty obvious that if you go right out to PE, which is often what schools do, then kids who are anxious to get out on the playground shortcut their meals.

We think of today's kids as having grown up as a junk food generation, but it's often their parents who grew up surrounded by junk food, and they passed on those habits to their kids. We've lost a lot of parent role modeling. Parents often lack the ability to make wise food choices, or lack the skills to prepare fresh food. We've lost our home economics courses. Even so, time and time again, I have seen children take food knowledge home and really make a difference with their parents. They often help teach their parents about healthy, fresh food. Sometimes they take their parents to the farmers' market. Sometimes they bring home food preparation skills that their parents forgot or never had.

When we connect schools and parents, we find that many parents have skills that they can bring into the classroom. This is especially true of parents who have traditional cooking skills from different cultures. I've seen it happen so many times, where a parent who

might not be participating at all in school is asked to come in and share ethnic recipes—often a traditional recipe that incorporates local seasonal foods. They come, they meet people, and they see the values of their culture being recognized and honored.

That reminds me of a study among the Hmong living in Berkeley. Their kids were taking home processed food like pizza, and the parents felt, "Okay, this is the culture, and I want to learn this culture. So, we'd better serve this at home." Meanwhile the study I referred to was busy highlighting the wonderful, delicious, high-nutrient fruit-and-vegetable recipes that the parents knew. Seeing their culture valued, and perceiving themselves as having a rich cultural gift to contribute, can be the door that leads those parents to become much more involved in the school and in the community. I've seen that happen repeatedly.

Moving from good ideas to action is never easy. School systems are among the most entrenched systems in our culture, often for good reason. We see programs succeed most often when a key administrator, especially a superintendent, is driving them. Sometimes administrators aren't ready. Sometimes school lunch and nutrition education programs are too far down their priority lists. Then, the change process can still be initiated from the ground up. It can begin with a food service director, or a parent, or a school nurse. I've seen it begin with a school board member who became very interested, inspired the rest of the board, and dragged the principal into it. I've even seen students take it on as a project.

So it can work from the top down, or from the ground up, but it's ideal if you have both. The most important thing is to start somewhere, and stay with it. Probably more than anything else you need an advocate, someone who will spend the time and energy to stick with it. The change you want is so positive that many people will be drawn toward it. But you still need an advocate to bring the different groups together.

Building partnerships, among administrators and parents, or teachers and nurses, or between schools and the agricultural community is a way in to involve new partners in the effort. In fact, I did that with school bus drivers, who look skeptically at programs that require changes in the bus schedule—one of the big obstacles to successful breakfast programs. Knowing that food talks, I invited the bus drivers to dinner. We talked about goals, and imagined working together to make the program happen for the kids. The next thing I knew, the drivers were adjusting their schedules to encourage breakfasts for children.

About the author *Marilyn Briggs served the California Department of Education for over 20 years, most recently as director of the Nutrition Services Division and Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction, after serving as administrator, assistant division director and acting director of the Child Nutrition and Food Distribution Division. She was section chief of the Nutrition, Education, Therapy, and Research Unit of the Veterans Administration Hospital in San Francisco, nutrition education specialist of the San Juan Unified School District in California, public health nutritionist for Hawaii State Department of Health, instructor at the University of Hawaii, and assistant director of the Dietetics Department at American River College. She was the first recipient of the Award for Outstanding Contributions from the California Conference of Local Health Department Nutritionists. She has been a keynote speaker at numerous conferences, and served as an officer in many nutrition organizations, including the editorial board of the Journal of Nutrition Education and president of the Society for Nutrition Education. She is finishing a doctorate in nutrition sciences at the University of California, Davis.*

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Learning in the Real World

Learning in the Real World® is a publishing imprint of the Center for Ecoliteracy, a public foundation located in Berkeley, California.

The Center for Ecoliteracy is dedicated to education for sustainable living by fostering a profound understanding of the natural world, grounded in direct experience.

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